

Does your sense of taste change when you fly?

It is a well-known comment that the food on an airplane has little taste to it. Or that airplane food sometimes tastes very salty. Perhaps you have heard (fellow) passengers mention this or have experienced it yourself on board. Could that be the reason why spicy dishes and pasta with tomato sauce are regularly on the menu? Or is it all based on myths? We've looked into this!

How does taste work?

Taste buds are located on the tongue, the palate in the back of the mouth and in the pharynx. There are six different primary flavours: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, umami, starchy. The taste of a product is determined by the combination and concentration of substances that trigger a particular taste. But it is not only the primary basic flavours that determine the taste of a product. The temperature, odour, consistency and appearance of foods also create the taste.

Tasting food is a combination of seeing, smelling and feeling. And don't forget saliva. Solid food is dissolved in the saliva which, in turn, provides a taste transfer to the taste buds.

Different flavours are tasted all over the tongue. It is not the case that there is a specific area on the tongue for each taste. We used to think that this was the case. As a person gets older, he or she loses more and more taste buds. This explains why the way someone experiences taste changes over the years.

What about taste and smell in an airplane?

Flying reduces the sense of smell. It is similar to having a cold when your sense of taste also changes. In addition, in an aircraft cabin there is relatively low humidity, low air pressure and the sounds of the engines can be heard in the background. This combination paralyses the taste buds.

Dissolved flavourings can be tasted better than solid flavourings. That's why it's hard to taste food when it's placed on the tongue. Chewing releases flavours that dissolve in the saliva. This then comes into contact with the taste buds. If the air is drier, there is less moisture to dissolve these substances and saliva evaporates faster. The dryer air in an airplane also ensures that food cools off faster, which can change or reduce the taste experience.

Taste also decreases due to the engine sounds on board, this would have to do with attention disturbance. In the subconscious, the sound of the engines is distracting, which means that less attention is paid to the taste experience. Certain nerves are then, as it were, 'occupied', causing the sense of taste to change or decrease.

Do we eat differently on board than on the ground?

We certainly do! Aircraft food is more heavily spiced to compensate for the loss of taste. KLM does not add synthetic flavour enhancers and, instead, uses more natural herbs and acids.

So, it is not a myth, while flying we taste less and food can taste differently. When flying, spicy drinks and savoury or bitter food appear to have more of an effect on taste sensation than sweet and salty foods. Those flavours are more fleeting.

Fun fact: many people like to drink tomato juice on board. This is because spicy drinks and savoury or bitter food during a flight have more of an effect on taste sensation than sweet and salty foods. So that is taken into account and there is more of those foods and drinks on board!